

Tragedy at My Lai  
LCDR Jason Sparks

War, like all events in history, does not happen in a vacuum. There are always multiple factors that lead up to or create an event that alters history. The “My Lai massacre” which occurred during the Vietnam War was no different. On the morning of March 16, 1968 a company of American GIs descended on the sub-hamlet. In their wake they left an estimated 450 to 500 civilians dead and the tiny village burned to the ground.

What led “normal all-American boys” to conduct such savage acts of cruelty and murder? Throughout the course of research three contributing elements stood out above all others. Those were the cultural and military training of the American soldiers, the Viet Cong (VC) tactics and the attitudes and leadership of the officers who led the American soldiers. It was the collision of these three elements on that fateful morning that culminated in an event that shocked the world and scarred the United States’ reputation for the rest of the war. The removal of any one of these three elements had equal potential to save the villagers and the sub-hamlet of My Lai. However, only one of them could have actually been removed or altered and that was the leadership itself. The US soldiers’ training and the VC tactics had long been established by this point in the war with cumulative effects. Logically it would have been impossible to change either of these in an instant to affect the final outcome. The officers directly involved with this operation, however, could have saved every live lost that day through their guidance, direction and leadership. A description My Lai itself and the events of that morning followed by a discussion of these factors will demonstrate these findings.

My Lai, or My Lai 4 as it was called on US military maps used during the war, was actually called Xom Lang (The Hamlet) or Thuan Yen (Peace or The Place Where Trouble Does Not Come) by the Vietnamese who lived there. It was a sub-hamlet of Tu Cung, one of four hamlets that made up the village of Son My. Son My was a peaceful village located near the South China

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Sea in the northeast corner of Quang Ngai, a northern province of South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> While it was not called Xom Lang until 1945 it had been inhabited for centuries. Its villagers subsisted on growing rice and fishing and there were plenty of both. Because of its beautiful beaches and scenery it eventually became a luxury vacation spot for many from Quang Ngai City and as far south as Saigon.<sup>2</sup>

When the country was divided at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel by the 1954 Geneva Accords an estimated 90,000 Vietnamese migrated north to join the communist. It was believed 90% of those came from Quang Ngai province.<sup>3</sup> As the insurgency, known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), began to take hold in the south in 1959 this area became a stronghold for the VC. The 48<sup>th</sup> VC Local Force Battalion was believed to be operating out of My Khe, or My Lai 1 as it was known to US forces. It was another sub-hamlet in the village of Son My. Charlie Company of the First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry, Eleventh Infantry Brigade, Twenty-Third Infantry Division (the Americal Division) thought they were assaulting this sub-hamlet when they landed in the outlying rice paddies of My Lai 4.

Charlie Company was operating as part of Task Force Barker taking part in Operation Muscatine. Their job was to destroy any VC, remove the civilian population and destroy any support for the VC to include shelters, food and any weapons found.<sup>4</sup> It was approximately 0722 on March 16, 1968 when the first elements of Charlie Company landed. The soldiers were expecting a hot landing zone (LZ) and were ready to secure the objective to ensure there was no resistance for the rest of the company when they arrived. It was at this point that the confusion and slaughtering began.

When the soldiers disembarked the helicopters one of them spotted an old man working the rice paddies that formed the LZ. No one present at the time is exactly sure who made the call

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that this individual was a VC but when he tried to wave his hands someone fired on him and killed him. His ID as a Vietcong insurgent was never confirmed.<sup>5</sup> From here the company moved into My Lai 4 to begin its clearing operations. First Platoon led by 2<sup>nd</sup> LT William L. Calley Jr. entered the sub-hamlet around 0800. The soldiers started pulling the villagers from their homes and began to interrogate them, which was the usual practice for such operations. A soldier from Calley's platoon grabbed a man and unexpectedly bayoneted him in the back and then shot him when he fell to the ground. From there the atrocities grew in number and ferocity. They included rounding up unarmed women, children and old men and shooting them in firing squad fashion. One elderly man was thrown down a well along with a grenade. Calley himself was seen gunning down many unarmed civilians as well as ordering his soldiers to do the same.<sup>6</sup> Although many soldiers did not agree with what was happening, many were actually seen enjoying themselves making statements like "Hey, I got me another one" and "Chalk up one for me."<sup>7</sup> A two year old boy had survived a mass execution and was spotted running from a ditch. Calley threw him back into the ditch full of bodies and shot him.<sup>8</sup> When the operation finally ended that afternoon it was officially stated that approximately 128 VC were killed.<sup>9</sup> However, this would not be the final count.

In 1969 it was revealed that anywhere between 450 and 500 people had been killed. A majority of them were old men, women and children who were all unarmed.<sup>10</sup> What could cause fighting men to turn on the very people they were supposed to be protecting? To answer this question we must study the three elements previously mentioned.

The American soldiers going over to Vietnam to fight the communist had a very limited understanding of the Vietnamese and their culture. In the early 60's the Army was still very much stuck on the idea of a large conventional fight with the Soviet Union and attempted to

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template this concept of fighting on to the Vietnam conflict. General Westmorland, the head of US forces in Vietnam, felt that, due to the political constraints placed on him, the best way to fight this conventional war was through attrition. That meant destroying the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) through search and destroy missions.<sup>11</sup> However, while Vietnam did have many conventional elements it was very much an insurgency and it was the Army's lack of understanding and training for this type of warfare that made life difficult for them in Vietnam.

Unlike a conventional conflict an insurgency requires a high degree of cultural understanding. This allows you to "win the hearts and minds" and pacify the population you are trying to defend. Many, however, felt that pacification did not really start until 1967 and by then it was too little, too late.<sup>12</sup> Because the Army was still focused on the large conventional fight they did little to include cultural and counterinsurgency training in their curriculums at any level. Beginning in 1962 many of the Army advisors going to Vietnam received some limited cultural and language training for Vietnam through the Military Assistance Training Advisors (MATA) course. During the four week course they receive 25-30 hours of conversational Vietnamese language training which consisted of an instructor on a stage saying phrases the students then tried to repeat and memorize. The counterinsurgency training they received was based on conflicts that occurred in Greece and Malaya but nothing was taught about what to expect in Indochina.<sup>13</sup> Counterinsurgency training for the Army reached its peak in 1965 and at that point 20% of the training consisted of practicing search and destroy missions.<sup>14</sup> They dealt very little with the Vietnamese culture or how to work with the indigenous population once you were there. Starting in late 1963 battalion-sized units from each branch of the Army were required to complete a six week counterinsurgency course that was capped off with a two week field exercise. However, because counterinsurgency techniques were difficult to simulate and train to

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they were often ignored. Troops were simply taught how to enter a village believed to be hostile and search for booby traps and question the locals. Once again there was very little training on how to secure and understand the population.<sup>15</sup> Training and cultural indoctrination that was received when they arrived in Vietnam was not much better.

Once in country the average GI still received little interaction with the Vietnamese. They would enter Vietnam at some port of entry such as Cam Ranh Bay or Tan Son Nhut Air Base, which were giant US military complexes. They were then flown or trucked to a base camp. During the war these base camps evolved into little slices of America scattered throughout the country. The only Vietnamese that the soldiers came into contact with were the few that helped clean and maintain the posts or the interpreter that was attached to the officers. They would finally go out on patrol and meet the villagers they were supposed to be protecting; the villagers that looked exactly like the VC and often were found fighting for them. When GIs did finally receive some R and R after weeks and months of fighting they could go down to some place like Saigon. Once there they would often get rolled and have all of their money stolen when they were enticed by some merchant into a dark alleyway and mugged. Other times they would spend all of their hard earned money on a prostitute who promised them a great night of fun only to ride off on the back of some local's moped never delivering on her end of the deal. While they were down in Saigon they would see large numbers of military age Vietnamese males and wonder why they weren't fighting for their own country. It was a frustrating way to learn about the culture they were sent there to defend.<sup>16</sup> The combination of not understanding the culture before they went over and then learning about the Vietnamese in the violent and corrupt setting of Vietnam itself created a hostile attitude in many of the American soldiers. This was even more so for units such as the Americal Division stationed in places like Quang Ngai that had to

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deal with this deadly culture clash and the blurred line of distinction between the VC and the civilians on an almost daily basis. The tactics of the VC did just as much to frustrate the GIs.

The Viet Cong based their tactics on the guidance of Moa Tse-tung. They used many of the Chinese communist leader's concepts for conducting an insurgency and a guerilla war. One of the main ideas they practiced was that of the insurgent being a fish and the people being the ocean in which the insurgent swims. If you dry up his ocean the fish will die.<sup>17</sup> The South Vietnamese population provided a substantial portion of the VC's logistical support to include shelter, food, medical assistance, labor (including setting booby traps) as well as intelligence collection. The VC often worked and lived among the people during the day and conducted operations at night. This made the task of separating civilians from insurgents frustrating at best for US soldiers.

US troops would conduct patrols for intelligence gathering or VC hunting. Often as they walked along rice paddies or into villages they received mortar rounds from undetermined locations or sniper and small arms fire from the villages. The Vietnamese working in the paddies or villages did not stop what they were doing or even take notice. It was as if they were either used to these events or they were expecting these quick and often deadly assaults to take place. Additionally, the Vietnamese working in the countryside wore the same black pajamas and coolie hats as the VC. Many times after having a friendly conversation with the soldiers and accepting their food, candy and supplies the villagers would escort the soldiers out to the edge of the village only to watch them walk through a mine field. A mine field the villagers were aware of yet did not tell the soldiers about.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not just the fact that the VC hid among the people that infuriated the soldiers. Their guerilla style of weapons employment played a large part as well.

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By early 1968 an estimated 90% of the casualties in the Americal Division were the result of mines or booby traps set by the VC.<sup>19</sup> And, as stated before, they often received sniper fire and mortar rounds from unknown origins. As a result the soldiers often never saw the enemy that inflicted the injuries or deaths on their units.<sup>20</sup> This was a very frustrating situation for the GIs in Vietnam. It resulted in an overwhelming anger that the soldiers were unable to vent on the enemy as they could through conventional combat. One thing they did know however was that the VC lived and existed among the citizens.

VC fighters, supporters and sympathizers were comprised of people of all ages and from both sexes. Even women and children were often found setting booby traps and explosives.<sup>21</sup> This only added to the confusion by forcing the Americans to focus on the entire population rather than on the 18 to 30 year old male demographic that traditionally populated the battlefield. One GI wrote his Maryland congressman after he returned from Vietnam in regards to the VC's understanding of the American view of ethics in combat. "They know our reverence for soft women and helpless children and know how to capitalize on this strictly Judeo-Christian hang up." He goes on to write about how the soldiers in Vietnam often found this out the hard way after experiencing their units being "half wiped out" by the VC.<sup>22</sup> This was not the type of warfare these young soldiers had heard about from their fathers who were veterans of WW II. Trying to protect a population that often turned against them combined with an enemy that often refused to show itself eventually led to a very natural response of anger and suspicion focused against all Vietnamese in the Quang Ngai province where the Americal division was operating. The lack of understanding the Charlie Company soldiers had for their operating environment was the wood. The tactics of the guerilla enemy they were facing was the fuel. Now all that was needed was a match to light the fire of My Lai and that came in the form of leadership.

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Charlie Company was led by Captain Ernest L. Medina. Medina was a Mexican-American who was raised as part of a hard-working ranching and farming community in Colorado. He lied about his age and joined the National Guard and eventually the Army. He realized early on that he was good at being a soldier and he thoroughly enjoyed it. He served as an infantryman for eight years and was then commissioned through Officer Candidate School (OCS) in 1964. By 1966 he was promoted to captain and became the commander of Charlie Company. Medina had a very commanding presence and was considered by both the men he led and his superiors to be an exceptional officer. During training exercises his unit conducted on Hawaii in 1966 he demonstrated his enthusiasm for killing VC and his desire to be involved in the Vietnam conflict which he truly believed in. He was very successful up until this point but realized that making the next step to major would be more difficult. Because he was an OCS graduate rather than a graduate of West Point he felt his chances were slimmer. He also felt a successful tour in Vietnam would be a great equalizer for him.<sup>23</sup>

First Platoon, Charlie Company, the platoon that actually entered the village and conducted a majority of the shooting, was led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr. Calley grew up in Miami, FL trying his hand at college only to flunk out. He then wandered from job to job where he found little fulfillment or success. He worked as a bellhop, a dishwasher, a switchman for the railways and finally as a photographer for an insurance company. He finally enlisted in the Army in 1966 and was quickly recommended for OCS. Like Medina he loved the Army and wanted to make a career of it. However, unlike Medina, Calley was a mediocre officer at best. He was not respected by his men and was often seen as incompetent. Nevertheless he felt the Army was the place for him and Vietnam would be a place he could prove it.<sup>24</sup>

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When Charlie Company conducted the raid they were part of Task Force Barker, an ad hoc unit that was thrown together to conduct operations against the VC in the Quang Ngai province. Body count was the typical metric of success in Vietnam and Task Force Barker had a reputation for high body counts.<sup>25</sup> This generally accepted attitude greatly affected the way both Medina and Calley conducted themselves during the war and more specifically during the My Lai raid. Many of the men felt that Calley had already conducted some questionable acts against suspected VC and was always the first person in the unit to brutalize the locals while on patrol.<sup>26</sup> By the time the raid occurred Medina already had a reputation for shooting first then asking questions.<sup>27</sup> This attitude was reflected in the guidance Medina gave his men the night before the assault, which was confusing at best. That night, immediately following a funeral service for one of their own who was killed by a VC booby trap, Medina made statements such as, “Well boys, this is your chance to get revenge on these people.” This was followed by, “When we go into My Lai, it’s open season. When we leave, nothing will be living.”, and “They’re all VCs, now go in and get them.” Many of his men were not sure if “these people” meant the VC or everyone in the village period. Others could not recall their leader’s exact words so were unsure what the orders were. Many, however, including Calley were sure they had been ordered to kill all, even the civilians.<sup>28</sup> There was no question once the raid began what Medina and Calley had in mind.

Although most of the operation occurred inside the sub-hamlet Medina stayed outside in the surrounding paddies with his command element. There was shooting outside and Medina was part of it. He shot a girl he said was an armed VC. However, the other soldiers around him said she appeared to be a local villager trying to show she was unarmed. Inside the sub-hamlet Calley quickly cleared up any confusion about orders and their company commander’s intent. Upon entering one of the First Platoon soldiers bayoneted and shot the first villager they encountered

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inside the sub-hamlet. Not objecting to these actions he joined in the shooting himself. At one point he left one of his soldiers with a group of women and children and said, "You know what I want you to do with them." The soldier assumed he meant watch them. When Calley returned later he barked at the soldier, "Haven't you got rid of them yet? I want them dead."<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the entire ordeal there was a large amount of confusion about who was doing what and when but, after the initial killings and orders by Calley there was no confusion about the desires of the leadership. That desire was a body count, VC or villager and, in the end, nearly 500 villagers were dead and a centuries old village was burned and razed.

There were other issues that affected the events of that morning. The Tet Offensive was only weeks old at this point and still fresh on the minds of the soldiers. Task Force Barker received intelligence estimations of VC presence in the area that were later discovered to be faulty and overinflated. Additionally, they assaulted the wrong village. While these are all very important factors to consider altering any or all of these would have done nothing to change the outcome of that morning. The Tet Offensive only added fuel to an already burning fire of rage against the Vietnamese. Regardless of what VC intelligence estimations were Task Force Barker more than likely would have deemed it large enough to conduct the raid. Additionally, by all accounts Charlie Company would have assaulted whichever sub-hamlet they landed in front of. Someone was destined to suffer at the hands of Charlie Company that morning. Conversely, altering any one of the three factors discussed throughout this research could have saved My Lai 4 and its inhabitants, dramatically changing history.

If the young American soldiers going to Vietnam would have received an appropriate level of cultural indoctrination they could have understood the Vietnamese for who they were fighting. It would have been understood that the agrarian culture of this part of the world demands that all

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people participate in the daily routine of farming and fishing. Men, women and children were considered equals when it came to working and supporting the community. The Americans would have been less shocked when they realized that this applied on the battlefield as well. During a refugee evacuation operation a young GI could not figure out why a mother would try to board the helicopter and leave her baby behind on the ground, and then refuse the child when he tried to hand it to her. He thought it was just part of their barbaric and inhumane culture. He did not know that they considered it bad luck to cross a threshold of any kind while carrying a newborn. It was customary to step across and then reach back for the child and pick them up. Another GI could not figure out why they would rather live in their old filthy hovels and refused to live in the new houses the Americans had built for them. The soldiers were unaware of the local customs that dictated the type of house a person lived in was based on their marital status. The ones built for the pacification projects did not meet these requirements.<sup>30</sup> While more effective training would not have made them experts on the cultures of Southeast Asia it would have allowed them to understand the dramatic differences between the lives they knew back in America and the culture they were experiencing while serving in this far off land. In turn they would have been able to view the Vietnamese through a more familiar human lens and less as animals or sub-humans.

If the VC's tactics had taken a more conventional form much of the frustration and anger that was released on these "sub-human" Vietnamese of My Lai 4 would have been vented on actual soldiers in the course of battle. The GI's burning desire to avenge their fallen comrades would have been assuaged by viewing the VC bodies remaining after a decisive engagement. The adrenaline, fear and anger that were the result of a booby trap or mine detonation could have been released through return fire if the enemy had stuck around to be engaged after these guerilla

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style attacks, if they had even been there in the first place. Knowing that the actual enemy was properly dispatched the US soldiers would have had little cause to suspect, abuse or annihilate the people that were placed in their protection.

And finally there are the leaders, Medina and Calley. As stated in the beginning, while all three of these elements carried equal weight this was the one that was possible to change. Rather than giving ambiguous guidance such as, "When we go into My Lai, it's open season.", Medina should have given clear orders and stated plainly what their jobs were supposed to be going into the operation. A review of ROE along with a reiteration of the rule that civilians were not to be harmed should have been included in the briefs given prior to the operation. Once on scene it was their responsibility to demonstrate this practically and keep their men focused and accountable. Calley's murder of several civilians himself including a two-year-old boy showed his men they were free to butcher the villagers as they pleased. It was well within their authority and ability to control their men and set the tone for the raid on My Lai 4. As the leaders of the Charlie Company and First Platoon it was their job to ensure America's young sons remained grounded in reality in spite of their grim situation. They failed dramatically producing the tragic history that is recorded today.

The tragedy happened over 40 years ago yet the lessons of My Lai 4 must not be forgotten. Though it is for different reasons we are currently involved in the same type of irregular counterinsurgency conflict that produced the tragedy at My Lai. Our soldiers and their leaders must understand the type of conflict they are fighting as well as the culture in which the conflict is taking place. And above all in the heat of the moment cooler heads must prevail. It is imperative that a similar event does not occur negating several years of hard work and sacrifice on the part of the US and her coalition partners in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

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- <sup>1</sup> Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*, 4.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 3.  
<sup>3</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, 3.  
<sup>4</sup> Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*, 6.  
<sup>5</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, 45.  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 49.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 56.  
<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 64.  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 77.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 75.  
<sup>11</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975*, 354.  
<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 352.  
<sup>13</sup> Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 48.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 49.  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 53.  
<sup>16</sup> Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*, 69.  
<sup>17</sup> Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 9.  
<sup>18</sup> Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*, 69.  
<sup>19</sup> Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 10.  
<sup>20</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, 11.  
<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 26.  
<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 156.  
<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 17.  
<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 20.  
<sup>25</sup> Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 55.  
<sup>26</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, 20.  
<sup>27</sup> Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 59.  
<sup>28</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, 41.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 50.  
<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 8.

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